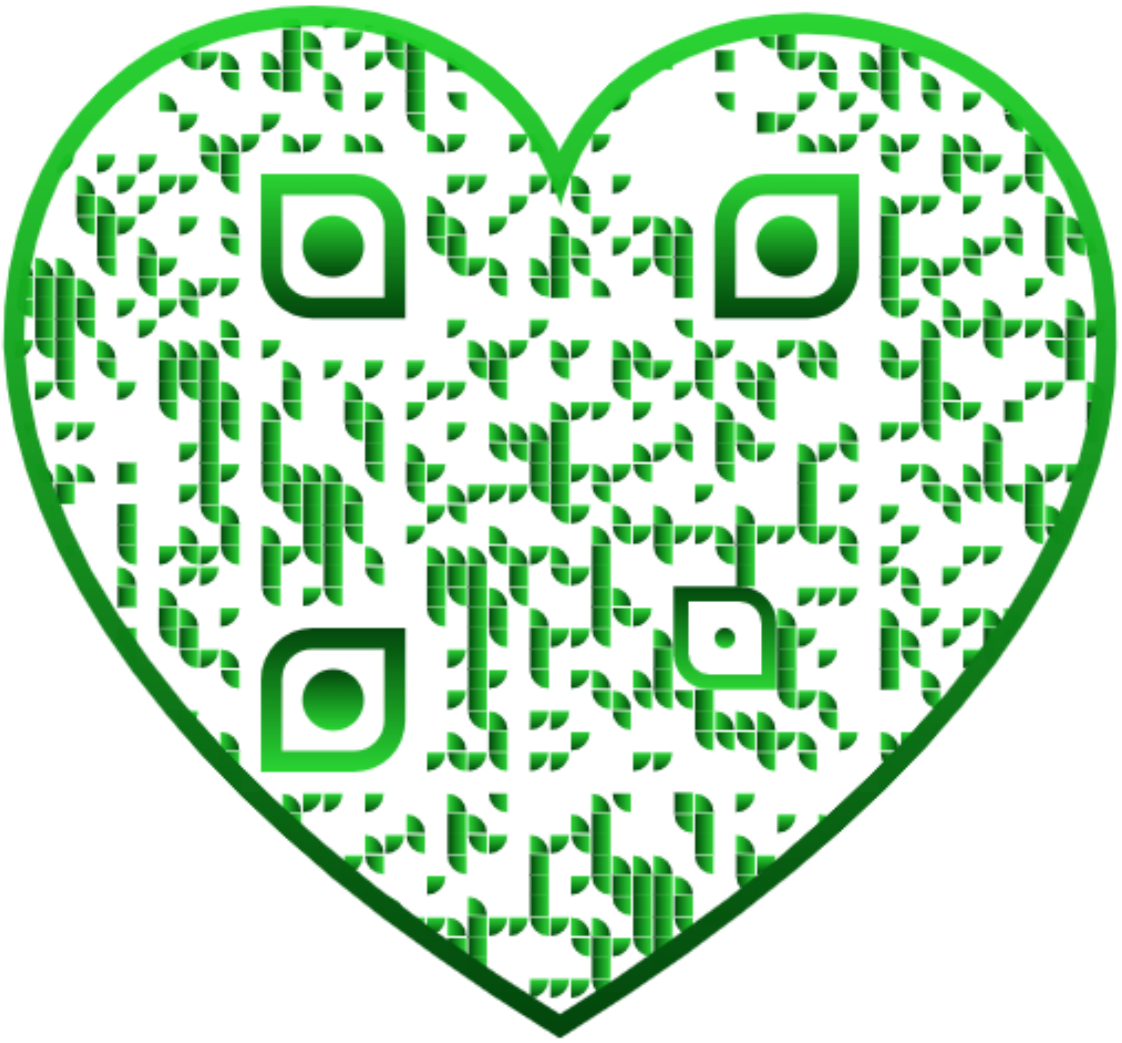
THE WORLD'S MOST INFAMOUS CULTS OF ALL TIME

CONRAD BAUER



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What Makes a Cult?

The basic definition of a cult is any system of worship that is outside the mainstream, and in fact, many cults develop as offshoots of more widely practiced religions. That being said, the labeling of cults can be pretty tricky, and many of the current mainstream religions were themselves considered to be cults at one time.

Even Christianity, now the world's largest religion, was once described as a cult. Christianity, of course, sprang from Judaism, and Christians were initially just an obscure group of people referred to as the "Nazarene sect" because they followed the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The establishment priests and politicians of the day looked down on Christians for their "cultic beliefs." Feared and loathed as disrupters of the old order, Christians were roundly ridiculed and persistently persecuted for their faith. Fast forward a few centuries, however, and the very Christianity that had been so despised had become the main religion of the Mediterranean.

So, as you can see, a cult is really only a cult so long as it doesn't catch on beyond a small group of people. If a cult grows into a movement with millions of followers, you would be hard-pressed to call it a cult.

But size alone isn't the determining factor in whether or not an obscure sect qualifies for cult status. The really classic sign of a cult is the behavior of its leader. Is he highly charismatic and able to manipulate his followers? Does he demand a strict hierarchy of control? Does he use coercion to keep members in line? These are the real dead giveaways of a cult.

A cult isn't just a religious group whose services you attend once a week. A cult is an organization that takes over your entire life. If you start attending a new place of worship and find yourself enjoying the charismatic speaker, well, that's all fine and dandy if you can come and go as you please. But if you happen to miss a service and that same charismatic figure demands to

know why, you just might want to consider joining another flock. Because when it comes to cults, control and submission to the cult leader's authority is typically the name of the game.

The other, more insidious trait that sets a true cult apart from a real religious experience is that it tends to do real harm to people's lives. There may be physical abuse of members, instructions to harm others, or even orders for members to harm themselves. In the most dangerous variant of cult activity, the doctrine itself is actively hazardous to members' health—or the health of the general public.

So if you ever find yourself in such a situation, my advice would be to find the nearest exit and walk out while you still can. Because as intriguing as cults can be to read about, keeping a safe distance from the brainwashing indoctrination they spout is almost always the better course.

Chapter 1

Manichæism - Cult or Failed Religion?

Although most people today have probably never heard of Manichæism, it was a rapidly expanding religion during the later days of the Roman Empire. It wasn't the only one, of course; Christianity was gaining traction at around the same time, and by 300 AD the two were widely viewed as rival candidates to replace the fading influence of Roman paganism.

But although Christianity's origins date back to the 1st century, Manichæism arrived on the scene about 200 years later with the birth of a little-known Persian (Iranian) prophet named Mani in 216 AD. By the time of Mani's birth, Christianity had already spread far and wide throughout the Roman Empire but was not yet sanctioned by the Roman government. Mani, however, was raised just outside of Rome's grip, in the only remaining rival to Roman power—the Persian Empire.

Religiously speaking, the Persian Empire was a veritable melting pot of belief at the time. Various Christian sects were making converts among the Persians, but an older faith called Zoroastrianism was still very popular as well. Zoroastrianism originated with the Persian prophet Zoroaster, who had lived over a thousand years before. Zoroaster himself never wrote anything down, but his teachings were orally transmitted after his death until Zoroastrianism eventually coalesced into an established religion around 500 years before the birth of Christ.

Interestingly enough, the famous three magi who arrived from the East when Jesus was born are believed by many to have been Zoroastrian mystics visiting from Persia. The truth of that assertion is a matter of debate, but it's worth mentioning because Mani himself drew strongly upon a blend of both Christian and Zoroastrian teachings. His followers, in fact, believed him to be the final prophet sent by God, in the same way that

Zoroaster and Jesus Christ had been sent before. (This idea of a continuous line of emissaries would later be echoed in Islam, which claims that Muhammad is the last prophet after Christ.)

So Mani took elements of Christianity and Zoroastrianism—and even some tenets of Buddhism—to create a unique new belief system. Manichæism taught that the universe was in constant flux as two separate embodiments of supreme good and supreme evil battled against each other. Simply put, the forces of light and the forces of darkness were at war. The battle these forces waged against each other was invisible to mortal men since it took place in the spirit realm, but our own world was a direct result of this eternal conflict.

According to the Manichæans, the physical universe and all physical matter was evil. Evidently, they took the Christian Apostle Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:50 that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" quite seriously. But they also took things a few steps further, because they professed that the universe was created as a consequence of light and darkness clashing. The fact that we are all here as human beings in physical form is simply a result of the fallout. The Manichæans believed that our true selves, our souls, were trapped inside the crude, evil matter of the flesh, yearning to return to the ultimate light source of creation.

As you can see, their belief system was both simple and incredibly complex at the same time. Simple in that you could sum it up by saying: light is good, darkness is bad. But incredibly complex in a cosmology that insisted that the entire physical universe was nothing more than a byproduct of spiritual light and spiritual darkness (matter and antimatter?) colliding with each other, resulting in pieces of light being torn away from God (the ultimate illumination) and mixed with dark, physical matter. It was this mixture, according to the Manichæans, that became the universe, and us human beings were merely pieces of this sacred light which has become trapped in physical bodies. Mani taught that it was in humanity's best interest to look toward eventual liberation (death) when the sacred light trapped inside the crude matter of the physical form would be free to return to the other side from whence it had come.

Perplexed? You're in good company—royal company, in fact. Just as the Manichæan faith was catching on in China, it was banned by Chinese Emperor Wuzong of Tang in 843 because—get this—it was "confusing the people."

Mani presented himself as the latest in a long line of prophets including Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus. But while he affirmed that these worthies were indeed sent by God (the force of light), he also stressed that what they taught was "incomplete" and that it was his mission to finish what they had begun. As a basis of his authority, he claimed to have received visions and visitations as a child by a being of light that he referred to as his "True Self" or "Divine Self." This divine self supposedly cued Mani in to the "divine truth" that would ultimately become Manichæism.

Mani taught his doctrine to anyone who would listen, and he soon had many followers. Some of these followers then went on missionary trips of their own, spreading the movement far and wide. Things were going quite well—until Persian Emperor Bahram came to the throne in 271 AD. Although Bahram's predecessors had tolerated Manichæism, or even looked upon it favorably, Bahram himself was a diehard Zoroastrian, supported by the Zoroastrian clergy. He soon decided to turn his hand against the Manichæans, and this crackdown led to Mani's arrest and imprisonment in 274. Mani died just a few weeks later, but in the meantime he received a number of visits from his disciples. During these exchanges he foreshadowed his imminent demise, assuring his followers that his passing from the physical realm would just take him back home to the eternal light source where he belonged.

Thus reassured, Mani's followers continued preaching his message both at home and abroad, and at its zenith, Manichæism rivaled the growing acceptance of Christianity. Both faiths were dealt a strong setback in 296, when the powerful Roman Emperor Diocletian decided to clean house against every religion opposed to the Roman Imperial Cult—i.e., worship of the Roman Emperor as a god. Both Christians and Manichæans were fair game, but the Manichæans got somewhat the worse of it, with Diocletian

ordering that any Manichæan priests who were apprehended should be burnt alive. And when Diocletian was replaced by a man that would turn into a friendly backer of Christendom, Constantine the Great, the Christians got the upper hand for good.

Upon coming to power, Constantine immediately began to reverse the draconian measures that Diocletian had taken against the Christians. He ultimately made Christianity an officially accepted religion of the Empire by issuing the Edict of Milan in 313 AD. Manichæism, though widely popular in various parts of the Roman (as well as Persian) Empire, had no such official backing and began to fade away into Christianity's shadow. The real turning point came in 380, when the Edict of Thessalonica made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The emboldened Christian Church, now backed by the power of Rome, promptly labeled the Manichæans heretics and called for their eradication. Ironically enough, the very Christians who had been the victims of terrible persecution just a few decades before began to campaign for a purge of Manichæism. In 382, they prevailed upon Roman Emperor Theodosius to promulgate legislation that essentially made being a Manichæan a capital offense.

This strong rebuke led to Manichæism all but disappearing from the Roman Empire, although the faith would live on for another few hundred years in the East. The end finally came when the Chinese variant of the movement was crushed by Emperor Wuzong's previously mentioned 843 edict. Still, that's a pretty good run, in terms both temporal and geographical, and in many ways it's hard to say whether Manichæism was a cult or simply a failed religion. History is still trying to sort it all out.

Chapter 2

The Cathars - The Cult the Church Annihilated

One of the more unpleasant—and most immutable—aspects of human nature is the tendency of the persecuted to become the persecutors the moment the opportunity arises. And so it was that once the Christian Church reached dominance in the old Roman Empire and the later kingdoms of Western Europe, it soon became very difficult for any religious alternatives to assert themselves in the region. It happened to the Manichæans—and a thousand years later, it happened to a group of believers known as the Cathars.

The Cathars were an offshoot of Christianity that came to prominence around Southern France in the early 1200s. Although they have no proven connection to the Manichæans, some of their concepts were strikingly similar. They too believed that a duality of good and evil was impressing itself upon the universe, and they also shared the Manichæans' belief that human beings came to the physical realm by accident when their spirits became trapped in physical matter. They further believed that in order to make it back to the spiritual realm, people needed to renounce all "pleasures and enticements" of the body. And along with all of this asceticism, they also decided to renounce the Catholic Church.

Like the latter-day Protestants, the Cathars taught that the Church was in error—and then they went on to argue that much of the Bible was flawed, or even inspired by the devil himself. And speaking of the devil, the Cathars had an interesting view of Satan's role in the scheme of things. They related an account of how at some point in the primordial past, the evil one went up to the gates of heaven and asked to be let in. He was denied access, of course, but eventually he was able to sneak in anyway. The first thing he did was try to convince all of the divine spirits he encountered that God

wasn't treating them right and didn't appreciate them. Satan, of course, *did* appreciate them, and if they would only leave heaven, he would provide them with real happiness down below. Some of the spirits fell (literally) for this Luciferian line of bull—and these became the souls of humanity, trapped inside physical bodies in the physical realm.

It's not clear where the Cathars claimed to have gotten this insight, but it certainly wasn't the scripture recognized by the Catholic Church. It may be rooted in the biblical concept of Lucifer deceiving a third of the angels, but if so the Cathars definitely put their own spin on it. And differences in interpretation aside, they were also highly selective about what parts of the Bible they believed at all. They steadfastly rejected most of the Old Testament, and in the New Testament they would have nothing to do with the writings of the Apostle Paul.

So it's really no wonder that the cult of the Cathars would be condemned as heretics. Initially, though, Pope Innocent III tried a relatively soft approach when it came to wrangling them back into the fold. At first he simply sent missionaries to the Cathars' stronghold to preach to them and attempt to convince them of the error of their ways. When this didn't work, he pulled some strings to get regional leaders to pressure the Cathars into recanting their beliefs.

The Pope quickly became dissatisfied with how these rulers were handling matters, however, and he was especially upset with a certain Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, whom he felt was not only not doing enough to suppress the Cathars but was actually shielding them from Papal authority. This led the Pope to send an official legate, Pierre de Castelnau, to the region in 1208 to announce Raymond's excommunication. And the anathema went off without a hitch; it was when Castelnau tried to return to Rome that all hell broke loose. For the legate and his entourage was ambushed, and Pierre de Castelnau was assassinated, stabbed in the back by a rampaging horseman who took off after dealing the deadly blow.

It couldn't be determined who this mysterious assassin was and whether he was connected with either the Count or the Cathars. But whoever he was

working for, the infuriated Pope Innocent III was through messing around. He finally took the gloves off and raised his pontifical fist to smash the Cathars into oblivion, and the sheer brutality with which this religious offshoot was taken down would shock the world.

The Vatican had been in the habit of launching religious wars since the days of the First Crusade in 1096. This was a call for Christians to take back the Holy Land from the Muslims and defend the Eastern Orthodox Christians of Asia Minor. But in the Albigensian Crusade, European knights wouldn't be fighting Islamists in a faraway land—they would be fighting a cultish offshoot of Christianity right in their own backyard.

Making matters even more volatile was the fact that the Pope commissioned a bishop named Arnaud Amaury—who just so happened to be a close friend of the assassinated Pierre de Castelnau—to oversee the operation. Bitter over what had happened to his buddy, Arnaud eschewed the compassion, mercy and forgiveness recommended in the Gospel and made sure that the mission was one of outright vengeance and retribution. If the rank and file Crusaders had any qualms about this, they were apparently overcome by the promise of "full remission of their sins, suspension of their debts, and a wealth of Church funds."

The first battle of the Albigensian Crusade broke out in the summer of 1209 when the Crusaders came upon the Cathar stronghold of Béziers, a city in the southwest of France. Standing at the gates, Arnaud read a list of Cathar leaders and demanded that they be turned over to his tender mercies, adding that if they weren't within 24 hours, he would raze the city. The only response he got was someone shouting "we would rather drown!" (apparently in reference to the river that surrounded the city).

The next day, a lone Crusader strode across the bridge to Béziers and began to hurl insults at the defenders who stood on its walls. If this was a ruse to get the Cathars to open the city gates, it worked. Enraged, and no doubt encouraged by the fact that their heckler was all by himself, several Cathars threw open the gate and charged the man. The Crusader was "seized,

thrown to the ground, and soundly beaten" before being thrown off the bridge and into the river below.

The Cathars' satisfaction in having gotten rid of this pest was short lived, however. With the gate open, the rest of the Crusader army quickly rushed through it into the city. The hapless defenders were powerless to stop them, and soon the entire city was put to the sword. Yes, the *entire* city—and as you might guess, that included not only the Cathars, but also plenty of Catholic residents. It's true that the Crusaders had issued a warning that Catholics should evacuate the city lest they be caught up in the fighting. However, it's believed that very few had actually done so.

For his part, Arnaud apparently believed that a word to the wise should have been sufficient. When his subordinates pointed out that it was impossible to tell who was a Cathar and who was a Catholic just by looking at them, he simply shrugged and said, "Kill them all! God will know his own!" After the bloodshed was over, he confirmed the atrocity by writing a progress report to the Pope: "Today, Your Holiness, twenty thousand heretics were put to the sword, regardless of rank, age, or sex."

They next Cathar city to be targeted was Carcassonne, which put up a valiant defense but was ultimately forced to surrender. Perhaps feeling he'd proved his point at Béziers, Arnaud was surprisingly merciful this time around, allowing survivors to leave the city as long as they left all of their belongings behind. Some were forced to flee without even the shirt on their back, prompting one witness to quip that they left with "nothing but their sins."

After the fall of Carcassonne, all the other Cathar towns in Southern France fell one after the other. By 1213, the Pope apparently felt that these so-called heretics had had enough and called off the Crusade. The cult of the Cathars would live on in various pockets of resistance throughout Western Europe until the last bastions of the faith were snuffed out in the 1300s.

Chapter 3

The Shakers Who Tried to Shake up the World

The Shakers wanted to shake up the world with their unusual beliefs and ecstatic experiences. Founded in 1747, they were an offshoot of an earlier group known as the Quakers. The Shakers originated in England, but it was when the movement reached the United States through the work of an immigrant named Ann Lee that it began to spread like wildfire.

Ann Lee came to the New World in 1774, right on the eve of the American Revolution. She was escaping a troubled background. She had been married to a man named Abraham Standerin and had borne him four children, but none of them had lived past infancy. She would soon separate from Abraham and renounce all sexual relations, teaching that remaining celibate was the best way of attaining holiness.

The shaking and trembling characteristic of the cult's worship was seen as a means of purging sin from the body through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Shakers also believed that they received special revelations of God that came forth during their ecstatic praise and worship services. To outsiders, the Shakers were putting on a terrific but ultimately meaningless display—but for the Shakers themselves, these practices served as a release valve for everything that was wrong in their lives.

Lee's cult's first home base was in New York City, where they stayed for the next five years as they watched the Revolutionary War pass them by. The Shakers chose to remain strictly neutral in the conflict; as Ann Lee would no doubt have said, their kingdom was "not of this world." When asked to swear an Oath of Allegiance to the newborn United States, they stuck to their convictions and refused, serving brief prison sentences as a result. All the same, Ann Lee must have been relieved when the Americans

beat the British, since it was the American commitment to freedom of religion that had encouraged her to come to the New World in the first place.

After the war, the Shakers began to grow in number—and especially after the infamous "Dark Day" which occurred in the summer of 1780. This was an event in which the sun was temporarily blotted out in the middle of the day, most probably due to a combination of forest fires and thick fog. The charismatic and dynamic Ann Lee seized the chance to show off her rhetorical prowess by preaching to a crowd against this dramatic backdrop. She held them in thrall throughout, bringing her little group to the attention of the larger community and strengthening the faith of her existing followers even further.

Soon some began to whisper that Lee herself was somehow a manifestation of God in female form. Lee took that and ran with it, modestly acknowledging that, yes, now that they mentioned it, she was indeed the second coming of Christ. She then began spreading the word that humanity's sinful nature could only be purged by treating men and women equally—even while "keeping them separated so as to prevent any sort of temptation leading to impure acts." Yes, in her own strange way, Ann Lee believed that the sexes should be "separate but equal." She implemented her ideas in Shaker communes throughout New England, establishing settlements in which men and women worked together as equals yet slept in separate rooms.

The Shakers were viewed as being rather strange in general, but it was Lee's insistence on female equality that really provoked the ire of the male-dominated establishment. Lee anticipated as much, remarking, "We are the people who turned the world upside down." Apparently, though, the British surrender at Yorktown had been quite enough world-turning for many Americans, and the Shakers soon found themselves subject to angry attacks by violent mobs. Ann Lee herself was assaulted on more than one occasion, and she died in 1784 at just 48 years of age.

Her death would not be the end of the Shaker cult, however. A man named James Whittaker held the leadership role from the time of Lee's death until his own in 1787. It was then that the charismatic Joseph Meacham took the reins, and it was his genius that would create entire self-sufficient Shaker communities based on a design known as the "Shaker Village System." Here the Shaker lived in communes under a regime of hard work and austerity. They had their own farms and made their own handicrafts—and these handicrafts quickly became quite popular with outsiders as well. For a group that supposedly shunned the material world, the Shakers soon had a very lucrative business selling their expertly manufactured goods.

They themselves didn't see it that way, though; they insisted that the "creation and maintenance of their villages" was a "religious, rather than an economic or social act" and that their organization of harmonious communities in which everyone worked and supported each other, with equality yet separation between men and women, harkened back to the Garden of Eden. After all, before the Fall, Adam and Eve had lived as equal but separate beings rather than being bound to each other in marriage.

The Shaker charter adopted at a convention in 1841 decreed that "When man by transgression lost his primitive rectitude, he then lost his true interest, both to God and his fellow creatures." This loss of interest in the divine had caused humanity to become "selfish and partial" to the material world, rather than loving God and his creation. Christ had reestablished this unity with God and creation when he was on the Earth with the disciples, but after Christ's return to heaven, Christians had a "falling away" from His "true religious teachings and practices." These later Shakers believed that it was none other than the dearly departed Ann Lee—"Mother Ann"—who had restored the "true nature of order of the church."

The Shakers thought that living in their own separate communities, in which they could help each other while simultaneously banishing the outside world, would help keep them in good spiritual order. Despite their isolation, however, they still found ways to reach out and help those on the outside. During the Irish Potato Famine, for example, American Shakers donated an abundance of food from their own farms and had it shipped off

to Ireland. Shortly afterward, one Shaker claimed to have been visited by the ghost of Ann Lee, who allegedly proclaimed that “the starvation which is in Ireland is the beginning of the heavy judgments which will surely fall upon the wicked inhabitants of the Earth.”

By this time the Shakers had expanded from their base in New England to establish several Midwestern enclaves in states such as Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. Thus, when the Civil War broke out in 1861, they were geographically as well as philosophically aligned with the anti-slavery cause of the Union in the North. However, they still abhorred violence of any kind and refused to take part in the war. Fortunately, the U.S. government was much more lenient this time around, and instead of jailing the Shakers, President Abraham Lincoln gave them a special exemption from the draft, making them among the very first conscientious objectors in the United States.

The aftermath of the Civil War, however, was not as kind to the Shaker way of life. It was during this period that America transitioned into a fully industrialized economy, and this quickly made the Shakers’ handcrafted furniture more or less obsolete. This first drained the finances of the Shaker communities, and then drained them of new converts—which was a serious problem since Shakers by definition didn’t reproduce themselves. The trend only accelerated through the 20th century, by the end of which the Shakers were a mere ghost of what they had been before.

And as of this writing, only one Shaker village remains. Called Sabbathday Lake and located in the state of Maine, this last bastion of Shaker fervor is now down to just a few members. Will the Shaker cult die out with these last few true believers? Or will a sudden Shaker revival sweep the land? It sure doesn’t seem likely, but with a movement as resilient as the Shakers, you never can tell.

Chapter 4

The Blood Atonement of the Church of the Lamb of God

The Church of the Lamb of God is a cult that traces its roots to the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a first-generation Mormon named Benjamin F. Johnson. Johnson practiced polygamy, just as LDS founder Joseph Smith espoused, and when the Mormons finally renounced the practice after coming under pressure from the U.S. government, he was among those who rebelled.

Johnson's descendants were still polygamists by the time his grandson Alma Dayer LeBaron came into his own in the 1920s—and the U.S. government was still steadfastly opposed to the practice. To escape from this perceived persecution, Alma therefore decided to move himself, his family, and his likeminded brethren to Mexico. Once there, he began preaching that his Grandpa Ben, not Brigham Young, had been the rightful successor to Joseph Smith—which conveniently made Alma himself the current head of the true Mormon faith.

Rather predictably, after Alma passed away his own children continued to claim leadership of the church under this theory. His eldest son, Joel, established his own denomination called the Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness of Times. Joel appointed his second oldest brother, Ervil, to be his right-hand man, while their younger brother Verlan was given a slightly lower but still important role.

Everything was fine until 1967, when Joel and Ervil got into a dispute over the practice of "blood atonement," which commanded that a sinner must have their blood shed under certain circumstances in order to atone. Joel didn't hold with blood atonement, probably because he was worried that the

vengeful Ervil would use it to exact lethal retribution against church members who rubbed him the wrong way.

His fears proved to be justified. When Ervil broke away and founded his own cult called the Church of the First Born of the Lamb of God, his first target for blood atonement was Joel himself. Ervil sent two of his followers, Daniel Ben Jordan and Gamaliel Rios, to ambush and assassinate his brother and erstwhile boss. Not having done much to cover his tracks, Ervil was soon arrested, tried, and convicted for Joel's murder. However, he was set free by an appellate court less than a year later.

Thus emancipated, Ervil entered a new phase in his maddening megalomania by asserting to his flock that he was the "One Mighty and Strong" prophesied by Joseph Smith. In other words, he was basically God's representative on Earth, with the power to decide who would live and who would die. And the next person who Ervil decided ought to die was his surviving sibling Verlan, who in the wake of Joel's death had become the new steward of the Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness of Times.

Verlan knew that he was a hunted man and began to lie low. Nevertheless, Ervil thought he had tracked him down and sent his young thirteenth wife Rena Chynoweth, along with her brothers Duane and Mark, to assault Verlan's compound. The Chynoweths hurled firebombs and shot up the property, leaving two dead 13 injured. But despite all of the destruction, Verlan was not harmed. In fact, Verlan wasn't even there; sensing that his brother was closing in, he had wisely relocated to Nicaragua.

Ervil was once again arrested, but as the police couldn't find any physical evidence of his involvement—or anyone willing to testify against him—he was soon released. By this point, though, some of Ervil's own disciples were beginning to murmur against him. Firebombing homes and shooting up random people seemed like a bit too much even for the One Mighty and Strong. One of those who spoke out was Noemi Zarate, who was Rena Chynoweth's mother and apparently didn't like the idea of her daughter being ordered to commit military-style assaults. Go figure, right?

Well, Ervil wasn't going to stand for this insolence. He ordered that Noemi atone for her sins—which naturally meant that she had to die. Ervil accordingly asked another one of his wives, Vonda White, to drive Noemi out to the desert and do away with her. And that was the last anyone saw of Noemi Zarate—but it would not be the last blood atonement that Ervil would request.

In 1975, after it came to light that Ervil intended to marry the wife of Mormon leader Robert Simons, Simons—for some odd reason—denounced Ervil from the pulpit. Once again feeling wronged, and probably thinking that it would simplify his impending nuptials with Mrs. Simons, Ervil ordered Mark Chynoweth and Eddie Marston to take Mr. Simons out of the picture. They murdered him in the spring of 1975. Later that same year, Vonda White was once again the trigger woman in the killing of Dean Vest, a Lamb of God member who was attempting to flee the cult.

The next blood atonement was decreed in 1977, when Ervil sanctioned the killing of his own daughter, Rebecca, who was married to none other than Mark Chynoweth. Rebecca had apparently grown disillusioned with the cult's nefarious activities and was threatening to go to the police. This was all Ervil needed to know in order to decide that she had to go. Rebecca's mother, Ervil's first wife, Delfina, was understandably horrified when she found out that her daughter had died at her husband's hands—but when she protested, Ervil just threatened her with a blood atonement of her own if she didn't "settle down." Knowing that she might be next, Delfina took her youngest child and escaped from the cult compound.

That left Ervil free to turn his attention back to murdering his brother Verlan. Knowing now just how hard it would be to corner his elusive sibling, he came up with a convoluted plot to assassinate Rulon C. Allred, the leader of a large Mormon congregation called the Apostolic United Brethren, for the sole purpose of killing Verlan when he attended the funeral to pay his respects. Allred was indeed murdered—by Rena Chynoweth and Ervil's stepdaughter Ramona Marston—but a police stakeout of his funeral made it impossible to follow through with Verlan's assassination.

Ervil was once again arrested in Mexico, but this time he was extradited to the United States to stand trial for Allred's death. Convicted, he died in prison in 1981. Ironically enough, Verlan, the brother who had evaded him for so long, perished in an automobile accident while driving in Mexico just a few days afterwards. Was Ervil's evil ghost somehow exacting his vengeance from beyond the grave?

The story of this wretched cult does not end here, however. Upon Ervil's demise, his eldest son, Arturo, took over the Church of the Lamb of God and made it even more depraved than it already was. Because while Ervil conducted his misguided mischief under the guise of religion, Arturo turned the cult into an outright criminal enterprise. Under his command, members engaged in everything from armed robbery to grand theft auto.

Blood atonement was still on the table, of course, as was evidenced when Ervil's widow Lorna Chynoweth tried to leave—only to be bumped off by her own son on Arturo's orders. When Arturo himself was killed by another cult member, another one of Ervil's son's, 20-year-old Heber, took command and presided over a reign of terror that saw several more cultists killed throughout the 1980s.

In 1987, the cult underwent another rupture that sent Heber and his immediate family fleeing from Mexico to the United States. It wasn't long before Heber was involved with murder there as well, and this time around he ended up behind bars for it. This would finally spell the end of this strange, warped and twisted cult.

Chapter 5

Koreshanity - We All Live in a Bubble

Just what is Koreshanity and why have you never heard of it? Well, despite its current obscurity, at one time, Koreshanity was one of the most infamous cults around. A big part of its notoriety was due to the fact that its founder, Cyrus Reed Teed, otherwise known as the prophet Koresh, believed that the Earth was hollow. And not only did he believe that it was hollow—he actually believed that we were inside of the hollow shell!
Koresh (no relation to the later cult leader David Koresh) claimed that in 1869 a beautiful woman had appeared to him in a vision and revealed this cosmic secret. He called this revelation Cellular Cosmogony, and he began to preach that not just the Earth but the entire universe was sealed off inside a concave sphere or cell.

Now, if you can get beyond the absurdity of the notion and pretend that Koresh's theory might be true, you would still have to wonder—what's the point? Even if the whole universe *is* inside a giant bubble, how does knowing that help us to know God? Most religions offer at least a few rules for righteous conduct and a promise of personal salvation of some sort, but the ideas of Cellular Cosmogony seem to give the believer about as much spiritual guidance as the periodic table of elements.

Nevertheless, Koresh eventually parlayed his revelation into a complete belief system including the idea that we are all immortal (whether we realize it or not) and that our souls are continuously reincarnated. By 1886, he had thousands of followers and was a regular speaker at a wide variety of both religious and pseudo-scientific conferences. In one of his most famous lectures, he addressed the National Association of Mental Science in Chicago.

Koresh also came out as a staunch supporter of celibacy, something he seems to have picked up when he visited the settlements of that other notorious 19th-century cult, the Shakers. Yes, although the Shakers were already dwindling into decline by this point, the budding prophet/cultist Koresh was studying their methodology and attempting to incorporate some of their practices into Koreshanity. Most significantly, he created his own commune patterned off the Shaker villages he had seen.

Koresh set up his so-called New Jerusalem just outside of Fort Myers, Florida, near the Estero River, and then attempted to establish it as an official town named Estero. However, this brought the Koreshans under increased disapprobation from the locals, who realized that incorporation would allow the cultists to get a share of the county road taxes. Previously fairly tolerant of Koreshanity, they began a campaign of harassment and downright persecution culminating in a 1906 incident in which Koresh himself was drawn into a scuffle that left him severely injured.

Koresh, who had touted himself as being invincible, never quite recovered from the beating. When he died a couple of years later, his followers were as surprised as he was. Reasoning that he was probably going to be resurrected in due course, they delayed burying his body until it began to decompose and they were finally forced to hold a funeral. Disillusioned, many left the cult at this point, and Estero would be completely abandoned within 50 years' time.

Chapter 6

Aetherius Society - Special Greetings from Venus

The Aetherius Society was founded by a British taxi driver named George King in the 1950s. King was just an average guy trying to make a living before he allegedly experienced something quite extraordinary in 1954. King—a man who had no history of mental illness—suddenly heard a disembodied voice, clear as day, announce "Prepare yourself! You are to become the voice of Interplanetary Parliament."

King couldn't even name a single member of the British Parliament, and now he was going to be working for the Interplanetary Parliament? What was this all about? The bewildered cabby supposedly received his answer a week later when an anonymous swami broke into his apartment and told him about aliens who wished to make King an ambassador for Earth. This guru also introduced King to meditation and yoga. Finally, the mysterious swami somehow tuned him in to "receive telepathic messages from the planet Venus."

This whole story is admittedly ludicrous, but anyone with any knowledge of science would probably toss this tall tale in the trash bin right there. Because they would know that Earth's neighbor, the planet Venus, is a hellish inferno with regular surface temperatures of over 800 degrees. Fahrenheit or Celsius? Does it really matter? Life as we know it clearly could not exist on Venus.

Yet plenty of so-called "contactees" during the 1950s claimed to have encountered beings from this planet. So alright, let's play devil's advocate with all this. If you were to open your mind as wide as a suitcase, you could speculate that perhaps these beings were made of something different from us flesh-and-blood earth folk. Perhaps plasma (which is what the Sun is

made of) or some other form of matter to which heat would be meaningless? If such fiery entities existed, maybe they actually *could* live in an 800-degree environment. Maybe. According to Ockham's razor, however, the most likely explanation is probably that all this stuff was simply made up.

Of course, it's not this author's job to judge these reports, just to relay them. So, suspending all judgment, let's just take a look at the beliefs that King developed after his supposed contact with Venusians. His main interlocutor was a being King called Aetherius, a "cosmic master" who laid the basis for the belief system that would become the Aetherius Society. Throughout history, such cosmic masters had incarnated on Earth in an effort to enlighten mankind. In fact, religious leaders such as Jesus and Buddha had been cosmic masters—and according to King, they'd come from Venus.

King explained that these cosmic masters were not physical beings but existed on a higher plane—which makes a nice escape clause from the fact that Venus is inhospitable to physical life. Modern-day member of the Aetherius Society simply say that the cosmic masters of Venus exist at a "higher vibratory rate" and are not affected by the elements as we are.

King stressed that we are bound to follow the teachings of these supposed cosmic masters. He also described a Law of Karma by which we are continually reincarnated into this world until we have learned enough, and lived virtuously enough, to finally move on to the next level—thereby becoming cosmic masters ourselves. Along with the perfection of humanity, King also foresaw the perfection of the Earth as a whole. He viewed the Earth as a living entity that was itself constantly evolving and therefore adjured his followers to do everything they could to protect the environment. Many members became involved in protesting nuclear power plants and industrial pollution.

According to King, it was all worth it, because the Earth was a very special place. So special, in fact, that the cosmic masters have had to serve as a defense force, constantly fending off evil alien invaders. So, if you've ever wondered why an advanced alien civilization hasn't invaded Earth and

enslaved us all, there's your answer—it's because guys like Buddha and Jesus have been battling those evil ETs to a standstill!

This is actually a big theme of the Aetherius Society, which goes into great detail about how the cosmic forces of light are constantly fighting the forces of darkness. And in many ways, this all harkens back to ancient religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichæism, and even Christianity—except the spiritual forces of light and darkness are upgraded with an exciting new sci-fi sheen.

That being said, King did come up with one altogether original—and intriguingly wacky—idea: his concept of the "spiritual energy battery." This was a contraption that King put together, which he claimed could store the spiritual energy of fervent prayer. And what did he do with this bottled-up spiritual energy once he had it? He connected it to a "spiritual energy radiator," of course! King claimed that whenever the world was on the verge of war, natural disaster, or some other crisis, he would hook his spiritual battery up to his spiritual radiator and unleash its power. According to King, these efforts prevented several wars—perhaps even a nuclear war—and given the fact that the Earth has never had a global thermonuclear war, who can argue with him?

George King passed away in 1997, but his cult lives on. The present members assume that King has become a cosmic master, and they continue to carry on his wishes on this Earthly plane of existence as best they can.

Chapter 7

Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple

Jim Jones grew up in the small town of Lynn among the rural back roads of eastern Indiana. He was the son of a disabled World War One veteran, also named Jim, and an aspiring writer and full-time dreamer named Lynetta. A young bride, Lynetta always felt trapped by her marriage, motherhood, and the confines of the small town in which they lived. She was always seeking something bigger and better than the simple life she knew, and as her son would later recall, it was his mother's unfulfilled aspirations that inspired him to become something larger than life.

Although Jim Jones would later buy his ticket to international infamy on the railroad of religion, his family weren't regular churchgoers in Lynn. Since almost all of the other residents were, this fact alone pegged them as a little odd. As little Jimmy (as Jim Jones was called at the time) grew older, however, he began to wander the town's quiet streets on his own, and during one of these forays he made the acquaintance of a pastor's wife named Myrtle Kennedy.

Myrtle invited Jimmy to attend her husband Orville's Nazarene Church, and the boy was soon attending services with the Kennedys every single Sunday. To their delight, he enjoyed every minute of it. Church opened up a whole new world for Jimmy, and where other children might be bored, he was enthralled by all of the dynamics that were at play during a Sunday sermon. He proved especially adept at memorizing bible verses and imitating the preaching he heard from the pulpit.

Myrtle was pleased to think she had made a new convert for the Nazarenes, but soon Jimmy grew curious about other churches and could be found sitting in at services all around town, sampling all of their unique styles and

approaches. Then he took what he'd learned and tried it out for himself. Neighborhood kids would see him outside in remote spots, where he thought he was alone, pretending he was preaching to a congregation. All kids take part in a little make believe every now and then, but Jimmy was taking it to a whole new level. And his imaginary sermons left quite an impression—most especially the funeral services which he conducted for animals. If he found some road kill, he would take the carcass, find a suitable burial place for it, and call other children over to mourn while he proceeded to give the beast a proper sendoff. Yes, little Jimmy was known to be rather eccentric, but the townsfolk generally accepted his oddness as just being "the way he was."

Jim Jones's real religious breakthrough came when a Oneness Pentecostal church came to town. Oneness Pentecostalism is sometimes referred to as the Jesus Only movement because, uniquely in the Christian faith, it does not believe in the Trinity. Instead, it teaches that Jesus was not the son of God but rather God manifested in the flesh. In other words, Jesus is not one person of a three-personed God—Jesus is God, period. To those of other faiths this may seem like mere semantics, but for mainstream Christians, this doctrine really stands out.

As its name implies, Oneness Pentecostalism is an offshoot of mainline Pentecostalism, which is perhaps best known for the practice of speaking in tongues. Most Pentecostals see these spiritual utterances as just something that can happen when one is engaged in intense prayer. For them, it's kind of a bonus for true believers, but certainly not a requirement for salvation. Oneness Pentecostals, on the other hand, take a rather hard line when it comes to this "gift of the Spirit." They teach that unless you are "filled with the Holy Spirit as manifested by speaking in tongues," you're not saved. That's right—unless you speak in tongues, you are damned to hellfire.

Jim Jones, though, was initially a silent observer when he attended the Oneness Pentecostal church. As before, he studied carefully while he watched the wild, emotional displays of enthusiasm. He loved to see the pastor, free from the rigid format of the more conventional churches that he was used to.

Shortly after this eye-opening experience, some big changes came to little Jimmy's life. His mother decided to leave her disabled husband and take her son with her to Richmond, Indiana. Richmond is just 15 miles south of Lynn, so the move wasn't far, but since Richmond was considerably bigger than the tiny town of Lynn, it was quite a change for Jim Jones.

He began attending Richmond High School in 1948. He was still a bit of an oddball, but was later remembered mostly for his "dark hair and piercing eyes." He participate in a Christian club that would periodically meet up and debate theological issues over a box of donuts.

Meanwhile, Jim Jones Sr. passed away, lonely and alone. His tombstone, however, attested that he still held out hope that his wife would return, since he left a plot open for her to join him when she died. Lynetta, though, was too busy spending her late husband's pension to think about dying just yet. Even with the pension, she still found it difficult to support her family, so when Jim Jones Jr. was a high school senior he took a job as a night orderly at the local hospital.

Jones became known as a hard worker who had an especial charm with the elderly and disabled patients. He was always able to win them over with his easy smile and pleasant conversation—the same set of people skills that he would someday so skillfully employ with his Peoples Temple Cult. The hospital was also an important crossroads for Jones because it was where he met his future wife and cult partner, Marceline Baldwin. Marceline was a nurse, and she too was impressed with the compassion and concern that he showed for patients. She was quite a few years older than the young orderly, but she fell in love with him all the same, and they were married after just a few months of whirlwind courtship.

After just a few *more* months, Jones's true nature began to emerge. And it was very different from what it had seemed. Most shocking to Marceline, he told her that he didn't really believe in God after all. His apparent interest in religion was all just a ruse to manipulate people. The reason was that he couldn't conceive of a God who would "permit so much human

misery." It's an old question—the so-called "problem of evil"—and the standard Christian answer is that the world's ills stem not from God but from a combination of humanity's free will and Satan's evil influence. Jones apparently didn't accept that explanation. He would have blamed it all on God—except that God was supposed to be good, and if God was good, he wouldn't have done it. Ergo, God couldn't exist. It's true that crises of faith are a commonplace—but knowing that Jones eventually led hundred to their deaths in the name of a God he himself didn't even believe in is still pretty shocking.

Of course, religion isn't the *only* way to manipulate people, and Jones apparently wasn't particular. Instead of becoming a minister when he graduated from high school, he decided to become a lawyer. He and Marceline therefore moved to Indianapolis so he could study pre-law. It didn't hold his interest, though, and he soon began attending a Methodist church in preference to his college classes. He impressed the superintendent, and by 1952 he was a student pastor.

Jones then started speaking at revival services where he learned a very important skill: listening to the plights of others. He developed a preaching method in which he would mingle with people in the audience before he got on stage and overhear just enough about their lives to impress them with what he remembered once he got on the platform. Jim knew that beyond anything else, people want others to sympathize with them. So, if before delivering a sermon he happened to hear an elderly woman complaining that she couldn't pay her electric bill, he would be sure to mention it from the pulpit. Just imagine Jones getting worked up into a frenzy about the downtrodden—and then suddenly pointing to an old lady seated in the pew and declaring, "And Beth! Beth! You better believe God will find a way to pay that electric bill!" Even though all he'd done was exercise a good memory, parishioners who didn't realize that he'd overheard their conversations would credit him with supernatural revelation.

Jones soon left the Methodists, and in 1954 he partnered with a man named Ron Haldeman to create his own church in the slums of Indianapolis. He called it Community Unity, and he envisioned it as a church where people

from all walks of life would be welcome to attend. At the time, most churches in Indiana (and elsewhere in the country) were racially segregated, but Jones was determined to buck this trend and bring people of all ethnic backgrounds together.

Jones turned on his considerable charm, and his flock began to grow apace. But despite his growing congregation, its inner-city members didn't usually have much money for the offering plate. Jones had to work several jobs just to keep the lights on, but he soldiered on and by 1956 he was heading major rallies, including one at Cadle Tabernacle in the summer of 1956. This rally attracted enough support that Jones was able to form a new church, the Peoples Temple Christian Church Full Gospel.

As this flamboyant pastor's notoriety grew, so did his efforts at social activism. He caught the eye of the Indianapolis political establishment, and in 1960 Mayor Charles Boswell made him a director of the city's Human Rights Commission. For the next few years, Jones worked tirelessly to bring equality to Indianapolis—and then in 1965 the crazy came out in full force and he ditched it all to head out to Ukiah, California, because he believed that this would provide a safe haven from a coming nuclear apocalypse for him and his followers.

About 150 of Jones's most diehard disciples made the trek with him, and he attracted plenty more in the anything-goes atmosphere of late 60s California. By the 1970s the membership of the Peoples Temple had grown considerably and Jones had ample airtime on TV and radio. Thanks to a steady stream of donations his finances prospered as well, and he was able to buy up properties in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Jones was also able to use the votes of his growing congregation to wield political influence on a local level, and the left-leaning political powerbrokers of the region soon took note. This led San Francisco Mayor George Moscone to appoint Jones as a director of the city's housing commission.

On the surface, then, Jim Jones seemed successful and even prosperous. But the beneficent facade of the Peoples Temple had already begun to crack. Disgruntled former members were testifying about abusive behavior within

the church, and the families of current members were clamoring that they no longer heard from their relatives. The word "cult" was now being applied to the Peoples Temple for the very first time.

As the bad press mounted, things came to a head in 1977 with the publication of an article in *New West* magazine claiming that Jones was extorting Peoples Temple members out of their Social Security payments. It accused him of getting elderly people to hand over "signatures on blank sheets of paper" so he could use them to take over their finances.

After this damaging exposé, Jim Jones decided to gather up all of his resources—and all who would follow him—and flee the country. Their destination was a tract of land he had previously purchased in the South American country of Guyana. Befitting his status as a megalomaniacal cult leader, he christened the place Jonestown. Still, psychopath though he may have been, Jones was also a perfectly competent manager. He organized his followers into self-sufficient groups to work the land and do other chores to keep the commune alive, and things went well enough at first.

Not everyone was willing to toil under the tropical sun forever, though, and soon some members were jumping ship. Deborah Layton was one of those who did, and in the summer of 1978 she came home and issued a sworn affidavit on behalf of a "Concerned Relatives" group. She stated that Jones "had assumed a tyrannical hold over temple members," and even more shockingly she alleged that he had ordered temple members to drink poison in what turned out to be a loyalty test:

Everyone including the children was told to line up. As we passed through the line, we were given a small glass of red liquid to drink. We were told that the liquid contained poison and that we would die within forty-five minutes. We all did as we were told. When the time came when we should have dropped dead, Rev. Jones explained that the poison was not real and that we had just been through a loyalty test. Life at Jonestown was so miserable and the physical pain of exhaustion was so great that this event was not traumatic for me. I had become indifferent as to whether I lived or died.

This affidavit found its way to the desk of Congressman Leo Ryan in November of 1978. Concerned about the other Californians who were in the clutches of the Peoples Temple, Ryan and his entourage headed to Jonestown on a fact-finding mission to see if things were as bad as Layton said they were—and if so, to find a way to get his constituents out of there.

After receiving word that Ryan's delegation was going to pay Jonestown a visit, Jim Jones initially rolled out the red carpet and attempted to put on a good show for the congressman in the hopes that he could convince him that Jonestown was a socialist success story. Ryan had reporters and a camera crew with him who documented several Temple members happily proclaiming how much they loved their lives at Jonestown.

But this was only the public face of the Peoples Temple, and Ryan and company saw a very different side of things just under the surface. On several occasions, they were surreptitiously handed notes from members who wanted to leave. This led to growing tension between Jones and Ryan, and this tension culminated in an attempted attack on Ryan by a cultist named Don Sly, who lunged at the congressman with a knife before being stopped.

Realizing they'd worn out their welcome, Ryan and his crew left for the airfield. They got there without incident, but as they were boarding the private planes they had flown in on, they were confronted by some of Jim Jones's most fanatical followers, who pulled out guns and opened fire. Their shots killed five people—Congressman Ryan, cameraman Bob Brown, NBC News reporter Don Harris, photographer Greg Robinson, and former Peoples Temple member Patricia Parks—and wounded several more.

Jones knew full well that he wasn't going get away with gunning down a U.S. Congressman in broad daylight. Fortunately, he had a foolproof escape plan—death, for him and everyone else at Jonestown. After the runway massacre, he once again ordered his followers to drink poison. The difference was that this time it was the real deal.

In the aftermath, investigators discovered an audiotape of Jim Jones's last words to his flock as they ended their lives right in front of him. You can hear people crying in the background as Jones counsels, "Death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life. If you knew what was ahead of you—you'd be glad to be stepping over tonight. Take our life from us. We laid it down. We got tired. We didn't commit suicide; we committed an act of *revolutionary* suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world!"

Without getting into the dubious distinction between "suicide" and "revolutionary suicide," let's just say that most commentators now call the event a "mass murder-suicide" on the grounds that Jones was responsible for the poisoning of 908 of his followers before he shot himself dead. But what's obvious from his diatribe is his desire to shift blame by insisting that the "conditions of an inhumane world" made him do it. Well, he couldn't say the Devil made him do it, because he didn't believe in him—but those who do are pretty sure Satan had a special spot in Hell all warmed up and waiting for Jim Jones the moment he pulled that trigger.

Chapter 8

The Nation of Yahweh and Its Death Angels

As violent and insidious as the Nation of Yahweh is, it's amazing how little most people know about it. This cult sprang from the so-called Black Hebrew Israelite movement which claims that Africans are the true descendants of Abraham and modern-day Jews are imposters. Black Hebrew Israelites most recently made headlines when a couple of them stormed into a Jewish shop in Jersey City, New Jersey, and opened fire.

With such antecedents, you probably could have predicted that the Nation of Yahweh was headed for trouble way back when it was founded in 1979 by Hulon Mitchell Jr., a former member of the Nation of Islam. And if you needed another hint, you could have found it in the fact that Hulon had left the Nation of Islam sometime in the 1960s after facing charges of child molestation and embezzlement.

Upon founding the Nation of Yahweh, Hulon changed his name to Yahweh ben Yahweh and declared that he wanted to facilitate the migration of African Americans to Israel. This, of course, fit right in with Black Hebrew Israelite Theory 101; what didn't was Yahweh ben Yahweh's claim of personal divinity as the Son of God. And besides the self-aggrandizing absurdity of the claim, it didn't make much sense in theological terms. After all, the Black Hebrew Israelites follow a form of Judaism based on the Old Testament, which doesn't seem to leave much room for a Christ figure.

As it turns out, that's another difference between them and the Nation of Yahweh—the latter actually *does* accept some of the New Testament. But wait, doesn't that just create another contradiction? If Christ had already lived and died 2,000 years ago, how could Yahweh ben Yahweh claim to be the Son of God in the 20th century? Well, like any good cult leader, he had

an explanation for everything. According to him, the gospel wasn't a historical account of how Jesus of Nazareth was persecuted under Pontius Pilate; it was a *prophecy* describing how Yahweh ben Yahweh would be prosecuted for racketeering in the 1990s!

The Nation of Yahweh initially set up shop in the Liberty City neighborhood of Miami, Florida. Despite its bizarre beliefs and hateful internal rhetoric, the cult presented itself as a force of good for the community. And to give the devil his due, the Nation of Yahweh did sponsor several successful revitalization projects in poorer sections of Miami-Dade County. In places that were virtual slums before, the cultists managed to drive out the drug dealers, pimps and prostitutes and set about improving housing and local businesses. They were so effective that in 1987 the Miami Urban League officially recognized Yahweh Ben Yahweh's efforts by giving him the Whitney M. Young humanitarian award. A few years later, Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez took things even further by creating a holiday he called "Yahweh ben Yahweh Day."

But even while these accolades were being heaped upon the Nation of Yahweh, some rather sinister things were afoot within the cult. Floridians wouldn't have been nearly so eager to praise Yahweh ben Yahweh if they'd known that he had been sending his followers out to kill random white residents as a demonstration of loyalty. He called these killers his Death Angels, and as proof that they had done his baneful bidding, he required them to bring him the severed ears of their victims. An ex-member of the cult would later testify that he was once in Yahweh ben Yahweh's presence when one of the Death Angels came in after a murder and casually tossed an ear to his leader as if it were nothing more than a Frisbee. Yahweh ben Yahweh was supposedly very pleased. All in all, it is believed that over a dozen people died at the whim of this evil guru.

Yahweh ben Yahweh's reign of terror came to an end in 1990 when he and several of his followers were charged with multiple counts of murder, attempted murder, racketeering, extortion, and arson. He was found guilty of plotting of the killings but only served 11 years in prison before dying of natural causes in 2007.

Despite its founder's death, the Nation of Yahweh still has a following. The current leadership has reportedly disavowed the past history of violence and discrimination—but many observers remain understandably skeptical of the cult's supposed change of heart. Only time will tell if the Death Angels are gone for good.

Chapter 9

Keeping it Real with Raëlism

The UFO cult known as Raëlism was created in 1974 by a 28-year-old Frenchmen named Claude Vorilhon who had allegedly had a strange encounter with a flying saucer the year before. Claude claimed that he was walking in an isolated area near an extinct volcano in Auvergne, France, when he saw a silver spaceship descend from the heavens. A "four-foot tall, greenish/grey skinned entity with long dark hair" then emerged from this craft. At first glance, the being was crowned by an angel-like halo, but upon closer inspection Claude realized it was some sort of energy field that encased the entity's entire head like an astronaut's helmet. Is this how the creature breathed our atmosphere, through the filtering of this field?

In any event, the being wasn't just there for sightseeing. It had a message for Claude: that "human beings were created in alien laboratories some 25,000 years ago and planted on Earth." It then told Claude to return the next day with a Bible in hand. When he did, the being began to discuss politics, society and religion at great length. It described how its kind had been involved in the creation of human religion and claimed that the "Elohim" mentioned in the Hebrew Bible had been mistakenly identified as God but actually referred to its own race. The alien didn't say whether it believed in a God who created the universe, but it wanted to correct the view that the biblical Elohim were divine.

Or more accurately, it wanted Claude to do so on its behalf: "You, Claude Vorilhon, you will spread the truth under your present name, which you will replace progressively with RAËL, which means literally 'Light of God' (and if we translate it more accurately 'Light of the Elohim' or 'Ambassador of the Elohim') because you will be our ambassador on Earth and we will come only officially to your Embassy."

Despite the apparent contradiction in the alternative translations of Raël—hadn't the alien just said the Elohim weren't gods?—this was some pretty heady stuff for a 27-year-old motor sports enthusiast. And that wasn't even the end of the alien's spiel. It went on to state that the Elohim wanted to create their own spaceport in Israel. Why Israel? According to Claude (whose father just so happened to be Jewish), the alien told him that the Jews really *were* the chosen people—not of God, but of the Elohim, who had included them in a special project to produce "hybrids of humans and Elohim." And while it was on the subject of eugenics, it also advised that the best form of government is not democracy but rather something it termed "geniocracy"—a system under which only those with the highest IQs could hold elected office. Part of Claude's task would be to spread geniocracy all over the world until a one-world government could be established.

Apparently figuring that that would be more than enough to keep Claude busy for a while, the alien then made itself scarce for the next couple of years. When it returned in 1975, Claude/Raël was in for an even bigger head trip—because this time he was invited into the spacecraft and whisked off to the Elohim home world. The vessel was composed mostly of streamlined solid metal without any instrumentation panels or even windows, although the floor was some "translucent blue material." Raël had no idea how such a thing could even fly.

Inside, he met up with a couple more Elohim, who praised him for all the good work he was doing to spread knowledge about them and their mission to make Earth a more just and equitable place. One of them told him, "You could very soon live in a genuine terrestrial paradise if only the technology that you have at your disposal today were made to serve human wellbeing, instead of serving violence, armies, or the personal profit of the few. Science and technology can totally liberate humanity, not only from the problem of hunger in the world, but also from the obligation to work to live."

And when the craft arrived at its destination and Raël disembarked, he was forced to conclude that the alien might know what it was talking about, for

its own world was indeed a paradise. He saw a landscape of "sparkling azure sea, trees, mild temperature and air perfumed with scents of exotic flowers." There were also alien-made structures that looked like "shells of bright colors harmonized with the surrounding vegetation."

The first thing Raël noticed about the Elohim themselves was that they did not wear clothes. Several of these naked beings took him to a banquet where they ate a meal while listening to music and watching "naked humanoid women" dancing gracefully to it. During the course of their conversation, the Elohim that Raël had first encountered finally revealed his name: Yahweh.

Yahweh, of course, is the word used for God in the ancient Hebrew scripture. But according to the alien, it was simply an Elohim name, no different than an Earthling being called Tom, Frank or Bob. Human beings, apparently desperate for something to worship, had elevated the alien Yahweh to divine status without his say-so.

Motioning toward the dancing women, Yahweh indicated that they were actually "biological robots" that were patterned off real people from Earth. Physically, they were authentic human beings, but they were "limited and submissive, only capable to act on orders." Yahweh pointed out that these bio-robots were recognizable by a small blue stone set in their foreheads. As they observed this unabashedly erotic display, Yahweh taught Raël that "all things that bring pleasure are positive, as long as that pleasure is not harmful to anyone in any way."

Yahweh then trotted out none other than Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad for a little meet-and-greet, instructing Raël that, like these great religious leaders, he too had been called to preach the message of the Elohim.

Thing got even stranger when Yahweh pulled out a photo of Raël's own mother and demonstrated how he could reproduce a robotic version simply by looking at her photo.

Raël was then sent to spend the night with several other female robots, and while we won't go into any great detail as to what happened next, the executive summary is that these fembots gave him a bath before taking him to a large seashell-shaped bed where they proceeded to pleasure him until dawn. Having just been told that "all things that bring pleasure are positive" by no less than Yahweh himself, Raël simply relaxed and went along for the ride.

Somehow he managed to maintain this easygoing attitude the next morning when the Elohim put a "machine" (a microchip, maybe?) into his head that would enable them to see and hear everything he experienced from that day forward. They told him that they would even be able to seize control of his tongue and speak through him, if necessary. Most people might be a little alarmed at that, but Raël apparently took it in stride and returned to Earth to preach the message of the Elohim to the masses.

The main tenants of Raëlism are pretty clear. Raëlians (or Raëlists, as they are also known) believe in a no-guilt, free-love society in which anything goes as long as no one is harmed. Call it libertarianism or hedonism, but don't call it anarchy, because they also believe in a government run by the most intelligent and the wisest of humanity to prevent the less intelligent brutes from lording it over the rest of us by sheer force. The Elohim stressed to Raël that human history has been plagued by the strong bullying the weak—or the rich utilizing the strong to bully the weak—and that they wanted this trend to stop.

However, the aspect of the cult that has received the most attention in recent years is their belief in biological robots—or what most of us would call "clones." This led the Raëlians to develop their own cloning research organization, Clonaid, which was run by Dr. Brigitte Boisselier, a Raëlian bishop with a PhD in physical and analytical chemistry from the University of Dijon in France.

Dr. Boisselier, Clonaid and Raëlism would all come under intense scrutiny in 2002 when it was announced that they had produced the world's first human clone. That claim has since gone up to an alleged 13 clones. At first

the story seemed almost plausible, as these were not clones in the science fiction sense of one adult human being instantaneously cloned from another adult human being; they allegedly came into the world as infants. However, in the years since Clonaid first made these shocking claims, much of the astonishment has worn off as the company has consistently refused to prove its assertions.

Supposedly, this is so that the clones' anonymity won't be compromised, and so that the parents who are raising them won't have to worry about losing custody. That being said, the first of these cloned kids was supposedly produced in 2002, which would make him or her a legal adult this year (2020). Custody won't be an issue anymore, and if the young man or woman wants to come out and admit to being a clone, there's nothing to prevent it. Does that mean that the Raëlians are about to introduce their clones to the world? Anything's possible, but I wouldn't hold my breath.

Chapter 10

David Koresh, Waco, and the Branch Davidians

David Koresh and his Branch Davidians engaged in a catastrophic showdown with the U.S. government in 1993. Anyone who was watching TV on April 19th of that year will no doubt recall the images of FBI tanks plowing through the fiery inferno consuming the Waco, Texas, compound of Koresh's Branch Davidian cult.

But as memorable as that moment was, the average person knows very little about David Koresh and the cult he led. He was born on August 17, 1959, to an unwed 14-year-old girl named Sue Clark, and the name on his birth certificate was Vernon Wayne Howell because, although he would later claim to be the Son of God, his dad was actually a guy named Bobby Wayne Howell who had split before he was even born. Ironically, his mother eventually hooked up with a carpenter named Roy Haldeman, who would raise the boy as his own son. A young, inexperienced mother and a surrogate father who was a carpenter? Yep, just like Jesus—or so young Vernon may have thought.

Nevertheless, his home life wasn't easy, and he had an even harder time in school. He couldn't focus very well in class, which led to him getting sent to Special Ed, which led to him getting picked on by bullies, which led to him dropping out of high school during his junior year. The next major milestone in his life was when he impregnated a teenage girl when he was just 19 himself. Shortly thereafter, he joined a church and began professing to be a born-again Christian. Fortunately for his child and the girl he'd impregnated, he wouldn't be around to share his newfound beliefs with them for long.

In 1981 Vernon made his way over to Waco, Texas, where he discovered an obscure cult called the Branch Davidians. Yes, although he was the one who would make the group infamous, it actually existed long before he came along. The group was an offshoot of the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists (themselves an offshoot of the much older Seventh-day Adventist Church) and had been founded by a man named Benjamin Roden in 1955.

Vernon's involvement with the Branch Davidians was minimal at first, although he soon joined the worship team, playing guitar and singing hymns in front of the congregation. But a couple of years later, in 1983, he reported that he was receiving prophetic visions from God. Around this time, he also became the lover of the late founder's widow, Lois Roden. He didn't bother to marry her first, thus violating the church's ban on extramarital relations, and the fact that Lois was then in her 60s and Vernon in his 20s would also have turned more than a few heads. Nevertheless, he quickly developed quite a hold over Lois, and she began granting him special privileges in the sect and even allowing him to preach his own messages in front of the congregation.

This led to a power struggle between Vernon and Lois's son, George Roden. In the end, George expelled Vernon from the church at gunpoint, and Vernon and some 25 followers fled to Palestine, Texas, to start their own commune. Despite the difficulties involved in starting over from scratch, the fact was that Vernon was a lot more charismatic than George could ever hope to be, and soon many more Branch Davidians were switching sides and heading over to Palestine.

As he saw the cult his father had founded slipping out of his control, George went into a frenzy and announced that he would prove that *he* was the Anointed One by… raising the dead. As improbable as it sounds, George actually intended to dig up a dead body and then show the Davidians that he could bring it back to life. Vernon was happy to let him try; he wasn't at all worried that it would actually work—and he knew full well that grave robbery was a crime.

As soon as he received word of George's planned resurrection, Vernon went straight to the police and reported his rival. The police agreed that exhuming a corpse was illegal, but said they'd need some evidence in order to take any action. So Vernon took a camera—along with a few armed men—over to George's church to see if he could get some pictures. It turned out he needed the thugs more than the camera, because as soon as they arrived on the scene, George started shooting. Outnumbered, he got the worse of the ensuing firefight and was wounded—but he also got the last laugh, because when the cops showed up it was Vernon and his henchmen who were arrested on attempted murder charges.

George wasn't gloating for long, though, because once it came to light that Vernon had been attempting to foil a grave robbery, a sympathetic jury acquitted all of his followers. Vernon himself walked after a mistrial. And it wasn't long before George would be the one up on charges after he killed another of his rivals—a guy named Wayman Dale Adair—by hacking into his head with an axe in 1989. He was ultimately deemed insane and confined to a mental institution instead of prison, but either way, he was out of the picture.

This left Vernon Howell as the sole leader of the Branch Davidians. To celebrate, he changed his name to David Koresh and took over George's old compound, the Mount Carmel Center, for back taxes. From here he worked to quickly expand his flock—and having developed a marked streak of paranoia during his clash with George, he made sure that his followers were always heavily armed.

The guns soon proved useful in another way, too, after Koresh realized he could make money selling them at gun shows. The problem was that many of the sales he made were illegal for one reason or another, and that would soon come back to haunt the Branch Davidians. In May of 1992, a delivery driver shipping some of the illicit weapons discovered just what he was carrying when one of the packages busted open and guns, dummy grenades and black powder came tumbling out. He alerted the authorities, and the ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) began planning a raid on the Mount Carmel compound.

That raid occurred on February 28, 1993, and while it still remains uncertain as to why, at some point during the attempt to breach the compound a firefight broke out. It left four ATF agents and five Branch Davidians dead and marked the beginning of a 51-day standoff.

The cult had received much bad publicity leading up to the raid, and the press had even camped out nearby to see the fireworks go off. It was just after 9:30 AM that an ATF convoy—complete with three National Guard helicopters—arrived on the scene to do business. When armed ATF agents arrived at the front door, Koresh slammed it in their faces, shouting, "What's going on? There are women and children in here!"

Now, one might think that if Koresh was truly concerned for the women and children in the compound, the best thing to do would have been to surrender peacefully. And the truly cynical might even conclude that he was announcing to the agents that he had bargaining chips in the form of human hostages. But regardless of Koresh's intent—and regardless of the women and children—the ATF agents really didn't show much restraint. As soon as Koresh shut the door, they began firing right through it, injuring a cultist. The Branch Davidians then returned fire and injured an ATF agent. The next volley of shots from the ATF hit David Koresh himself, either in the side or the hip and in the right wrist.

Amazingly, the ATF was forced to retreat, and the next few weeks featured a standoff punctuated by intermittent gunfire and periodic rounds of desultory negotiations. By March, however, agents thought they had made some inroads to a peaceful resolution when Koresh agreed to release several children from the compound. In exchange, Koresh was given air time on a local radio station so that he could spout his philosophy to the masses.

Although it did get some kids out of Mount Carmel, in a broader sense this deal backfired. Media outlets criticized the ATF for playing into Koresh's hands and giving him a platform he didn't deserve. Some warned that this would only embolden him further. And this seems to be what happened, because although part of the bargain had been that Koresh and his

remaining followers would surrender peacefully after the radio broadcast, Koresh said his piece on air—and then said that God had told him to wait on surrendering.

Negotiators' patience was wearing thin, and the ATF decided that, one way or another, the siege would end in April. They were still making preparations for a final assault when Koresh decided to give them some parting remarks on April 14th. He treated the assembled agents to an impromptu bible lesson in which he explained his interpretation of the Book of Revelation and the "opening of the seven seals" as witnessed by John the Revelator. He spoke of impending doom, slain martyrs, earthquakes, and the end of the world.

Well, there was no earthquake, and the world didn't end, but on April 19th, Koresh and most of his followers would indeed perish. Their downfall began in the early morning hours with tear gas being pumped into their compound. The ATF would later claim that it hoped the gas would flush the Branch Davidians out so that they could be captured without bloodshed. What happened next remains a little unclear—and highly controversial—but there was a fiery explosion in the compound.

One theory is that the tear gas itself ignited. Some claim that Koresh and his followers intentionally lit fires in the hopes of sparking just such a conflagration and going out in a Jonestown-style mass suicide. Still others maintain that ATF tanks barreling through the compound set off a spark that ignited the inferno. The tanks were used to tear a hole in the wall of the gymnasium, supposedly to create a large exit through which cult members could escape—but could this have somehow sparked a blaze that ignited the tear gas? At any rate, after the fire was finally put out, some 75 people—including David Koresh—would be found dead in the burned-out wreckage.

Most people probably assume that this was the end of this particular cult. But in reality, a small number of Branch Davidians are still believers—and one of the things they believe is that David Koresh will one day return. The second coming of David Koresh? It's hard for most of us to fathom, but it

does go to show just how strong of a grip some cults can have once you get sucked into them.

Chapter 11

Aum Shinrikyo -The Doomsday Cult

Cults from North America may get most of the attention, but that's certainly not the only part of the world where they exist. One of the most infamous Oriental cults—Aum Shinrikyo—made the international news on March 20, 1995, when it placed bags of sarin nerve gas throughout Tokyo's subway system just in time for rush hour. Thirteen innocent commuters were killed outright and dozens more were left paralyzed, blinded, or otherwise disabled for the rest of their lives.

All of this death and misery came courtesy of a cult that had been founded just over 10 years before by a man named Shoko Asahara. Aum Shinrikyo combined elements of other religions to create its own unique blend, with its main influences being Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The cultists believed in karma, but also in the prophecies of the Book of Revelation. It was from Revelation that they took their rhetoric about an impending Armageddon in which only a select few would survive.

Specifically, Asahara said that this Armageddon would come in the form of a third world war initiated when America attacked Japan. The two countries were, of course, staunch allies by this point in history, but some Japanese apparently still resented their defeat in World War II and were intrigued by the idea of a rematch. Asahara therefore used this message to capture the imagination of potential followers, then reeled them in from there.

And he must have hooked them pretty well, because not all of them walked away when Asahara began claiming in the early 1990s that he was an incarnation of Jesus Christ. As Christ, he said, it was up to him to take the sins of the world upon himself, which (assuming of course that Asahara actually *was* Christ) actually made a certain amount of sense according to traditional Christian doctrine. What didn't make so much sense were the

killings. Asahara was of the opinion that killing people was a good way to prevent them from sinning! By bumping them off before they could accumulate bad karma, he was actually doing them a favor and saving their souls.

Asahara's next major revelation was a timeline for the end of the world, which he announced occur in 1997. That wasn't more than a few years away, but most people didn't pay it much heed. The world was already caught up in millennial fever, and in the lead-up to the year 2000, doomsday predictions were a dime a dozen. From Nostradamus to the supposed psychic Silvia Brown, end times chatter was all the rage. So the words of this obscure cult leader, dramatic as they were, didn't really get much attention.

Aum Shinrikyo *was* starting to attract attention, though, and not of the positive variety. The cult was under suspicion of having killed a former member in 1989, and was also suspected in the subsequent disappearance of an attorney named Tsutsumi Sakamoto who had been looking into the cult's alleged wrongdoings. Sakamoto had vanished along with his whole family, and their fate would only be revealed after cult members who were arrested following the 1995 Tokyo subway attack confessed to murdering them on Asahara's orders.

They admitted that in the early morning hours of November 4, 1989, they had sneaked into the home that the lawyer shared with his wife, Satoko, and infant son. They brained him with a hammer, beat his wife viciously, and having thus incapacitated the two adults, turned their attention to the child and gave him an injection of potassium chloride before smothering him to death with a piece of clothing. The battered and bruised Sakamoto couple were then also injected with the chemical. Satoko died from it, but Tsutsumi continued to struggle until one of the cultists choked him to death. The assassination squad then hauled their victims out of their home, sealed each of them inside a different metal drum, and dumped each drum in a different location in order to keep investigators from realizing that the murders were connected to each other. While they were at it, they also pulverized the Sakamotos' teeth so that they couldn't be identified from dental records.

They needn't have worried—authorities never even found the bodies until they confessed and revealed where they'd stashed them.

In the early 1990s, Aum Shinrikyo began stockpiling chemical weapons. The cultists first used them on June 27, 1994, when they drove a refrigerator truck loaded with sarin through the streets of a residential neighborhood in the city of Matsumoto. They chose this particular neighborhood because several of the judges presently presiding over lawsuits against Aum Shinrikyo lived here. They didn't manage to kill any of the judges, but eight other people did die from the poison gas they wafted into the air, and hundreds more were badly injured. Unfortunately, police completely failed to connect this incident to the cult, leaving Aum Shinrikyo free to plan further attacks with impunity.

Three more people had been attacked by early 1995, resulting in one additional death, but the incident that finally got police to focus on Aum Shinrikyo was when the brother of a former cult member, Kiyoshi Kariya, was kidnapped and murdered. Kariya had known that the cultists were after him, and although he hadn't been able to escape them, he had been able to leave a note saying, "If I disappear, I was abducted by Aum Shinrikyo."

The police planned a raid on the cult compound, but Asahara got word of it—and apparently ordered the gas attack on the Tokyo subway to disrupt the investigation. So it was that on March 20, 1995, Aum Shinrikyo members released heavy doses of sarin on five different trains, killing 13 and leaving hundreds seriously injured. As a terrorist atrocity, it worked fine; as a distraction, it fell flat on its face. Police immediately suspected that Aum Shinrikyo was behind it and simply moved forward their already planned raid on the cult's main base in the foothills of Mount Fuji. Here they found a stockpile of chemical weapons as well as a huge cache of firearms, bombs, and even a Russian-made military helicopter. There was also a mini-gulag in which several dissident cultists were incarcerated.

Obviously, there was more than enough incriminating material put everyone in the upper echelons of this doomsday cult away for good. In the subsequent weeks, some 150 cult members were taken into custody on a

wide range of charges. Shoko Asahara himself went into hiding, but he was soon tracked down and arrested on May 16th.

Considering the wealth of evidence against him and the abhorrent nature of Aum Shinrikyo's actions, the ultimate outcome of his trial wasn't much of a surprise, but the Japanese justice system took its time getting there. Asahara was sentenced to death in 2004 and finally hanged (alongside six other cultists) in 2018.

Now that its leader is no more, you might think that Aum Shinrikyo would have shriveled up and died too, but you would be wrong. The cult actually persists to this very day. It has changed its name to Aleph, but the teachings of the disgraced guru Shoko Asahara do indeed live on. Japanese authorities are understandably concerned that this dreaded doomsday cult could one day kill again, but so far all they've been able to do is watch and wait.

Chapter 12

Hitching a Ride through Heaven's Gate

It was as shocking as it was strange. In March of 1997, several dozen people were found dressed in matching brand-new clothes and sneakers, lying on their backs staring up at the ceiling as if they were just resting. But they weren't relaxing—they were dead. They had all taken their lives at the behest of a cult leader named Marshall Applewhite who had promised that after shedding their "earthly containers" (i.e., physical bodies), they would hitch a ride on a UFO hiding behind a comet and be lifted up through Heaven's Gate.

Madness. Insanity. Whatever you want to call it, the whole Heaven's Gate affair stands out as one of the strangest cult incidents of all time.

It was brought to light by a man named Richard Ford, a former member of Heaven's Gate who learned that something terrible had happened when he received a videotape of the dead cultists' last words in the mail. Just before Applewhite and the others had ended their lives, they had made what Ford called "videotaped suicide notes" in which they explained that they were killing themselves of their own free will so that they could go on to the "Next Level." The alarmed Ford rushed over to the mansion where Applewhite held services to see if he could somehow stop the suicides, but it was already too late. To his horror, 39 of his former coreligionists lay dead from a massive overdose of phenobarbital washed down with vodka.

Marshall Applewhite's career as a cult guru had ended here, but it hadn't started with Heaven's Gate. He had first become involved with cult movements in the early 1970s. His life was a mess at the time—his marriage had failed and he had been fired from his job—and the strain led him to check into a psychiatric ward. There he met a woman named Bonnie Nettles, with whom he soon developed a strong bond. So strong, in fact,

that Nettles abandoned her family in order to travel all over the country with Applewhite attending various New Age gatherings. These two kindred spirits were inseparable. Everywhere they went, they introduced themselves as a comic, cosmic pair, with funny names such as "Brother Sun and Sister Moon" or "Him and Her" or "Bo and Peep."

It was under these nicknames that the pair started their first cult movement, Human Individual Metamorphosis. But rather than delivering personal testimony about how he had hit rock bottom and met the love of his life in a psych ward, Applewhite proclaimed that he and Nettles were actually from outer space and had come to Earth to instruct humanity "how to attain a level beyond" earthly experience. However, even the most open-minded potential converts found such claims a little hard to swallow, and Human Individual Metamorphosis ended up being rather short lived.

Applewhite and Nettles then rebranded themselves and began to claim that they were the "Two Witnesses" from the Bible (Revelation 11) who would be killed in the last days, resurrected from the dead, and then taken up in a cloud to the heavens—or as they later insinuated, a UFO. For whatever reason, this spin on things proved to be a little more plausible to the general public, and by the early 1980s their movement was beginning to gain some traction. In 1982, the strange pair was actually spoofed in a made-for-TV movie called *The Mysterious Two*.

But Applewhite's strange little world fell apart in 1985 when his partner and soul mate Bonnie Nettles abruptly passed away from cancer. He was inconsolable—until he began to console himself with the notion that she had simply left for the Next Level. This points to an important distinction between Applewhite and certain other cult leaders. Unlike, say, Jim Jones, who openly admitted to conning people, Applewhite sincerely believed much of his warped doctrine. And after Bonnie's death he would go on to refine it to an elaborate degree—and preach it to all who would listen. He spoke openly of how he and his followers would eventually need to shed their "physical containers" like one would shed a suit of clothes so that—like Bonnie Nettles—they could all go to the Next Level.

For Applewhite, the first sign that the time was right came on July 22, 1995, when it was announced that a new comet, christened Hale-Bopp, had been spotted. But what really got Applewhite's attention was when an amateur astronomer claimed in the fall of 1996 that he saw a strange, unidentified object seemingly traveling in tandem with Comet Hale–Bopp. Applewhite soon began preaching that this object was an alien spacecraft which was ready to take him and his followers through Heaven's Gate and on to the Next Level.

The comet would be at its closest to Earth in the spring of 1997, so Applewhite quickly mobilized his people to be ready to "shed their containers" when it arrived. Although no one was paying much attention to the strange cult, the warning signs of what they planned to do were there for any discerning eye to see. In the lead-up to the mass suicide, the Heaven's Gate website carried announcements like "Hale-Bopp's approach is the marker we've been waiting for"—and even more ominously, "We are happily prepared to leave this world."

Of course, someone who ran across these words (hey, there wasn't much else to see on the web back in 1997, right?) would probably assume that this harmless bunch of nuts thought that a UFO was going to beam them onboard and take them to another planet. To the casual observer, "leave this world" would not necessarily mean death. But to someone who understood the Heaven's Gate doctrine of "shedding containers," the message would have been clear. And even clearer was the announcement that flashed on the Heaven's Gate website just days before the event occurred: "RED ALERT —Hale-Bopp brings closure to Heaven's Gate."

Hale-Bopp was approaching, and it was now or never. The cultists had to shed their "containers" before the Gates of Heaven slammed shut. And not only that, Applewhite also predicted that the Earth was about to be destroyed—or as he termed it "recycled"—and stressed that "Your only chance to evacuate is to leave with us." So if they missed the Hale-Bopp bus, they were both missing a great opportunity to reach the Next Level—and setting themselves up to perish in Armageddon. Talk about a carrot and a stick!

And while most of us wouldn't have believed one word of what Applewhite had to say, his disciples did. Most of them died with him, and a couple of cultists who'd missed out on the mass suicide attempted to end their lives on May 6th, apparently hoping they weren't too late to catch up and rejoin Applewhite on the UFO. Police received a tip that the suicides were underway and rushed over to a hotel to find Wayne Cook and Chuck Humphrey knocked out by lethal doses of sedatives. Cook died on the scene, but thanks to emergency intervention, Humphrey was saved—until, that is, he succeeded in a follow-up suicide attempt less than a year later.

Considering the Heaven's Gate episode as a whole, it stands out as one of the strangest and altogether most tragic cases of cult-induced mass suicide in American history.

One Man's Cult is Another Man's Religion

Cults are a funny thing. Not funny in the "ha-ha" sense (although they can certainly be that, too!) but funny in their perplexing oddity and our confounding inability to accurately predict which ones are harmless and which will turn deadly. The Raëlians, for example, have some altogether bizarre beliefs, but so far they have been rather benign. Their mission statement is basically that life is precious and we need to make the most of it by fulfilling our passions without hurting anyone else. Leaving aside all the cheesy sci-fi imagery in Raëlism, the message itself is not all that bad. Contrast that with the other UFO cult we examined in this book, Heaven's Gate, which taught that members had to "shed their containers" and commit suicide!

Another funny thing about cults is their pesky habit of occasionally going mainstream and becoming a bona fide religions. Christianity, after all, was considered a cult for centuries before it received mainstream acceptance. Will Raël someday be viewed as a prophet on equal terms with Muhammad? As ludicrous as it may sound now, it's entirely possible. Things once thought entirely bizarre have a strange way of eventually becoming acceptable, even commendable. When Joseph Smith set out to chart his own religious course in the 1800s, for example, most of his contemporaries obviously underestimated both Smith's tenacity and the appeal of the belief system that he bestowed upon his adherents. They called Smith a crackpot and his church a cult, but now Mormonism is a major world religion.

It just goes to show you—one man's cult is another man's religion.

Further Readings

Here in this section, let's take a look at some of the reading and reference materials that helped make this book possible. You will find a wide variety of points covered in this book in each. Feel free to explore them for yourself.

The Cathars: The Most Successful Heresy of the Middle Ages. Sean Martin

Sean Martin gives us an in-depth look at the Cathars and their persecution at the hands of the Catholic Church. The events that led up to the Cathars' destruction and the immediate aftermath are clearly portrayed. This is a highly recommended read.

The Road to Jonestown: Jim Jones and People's Temple. Jeff Guinn

This book serves mainly as a biography of Jim Jones, but it covers a whole cast of characters along with him. This text has a lot of great material about Jim Jones' intentions, and the events that led up to Jonestown.

The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds. James R. Lewis

This text offers up many strange tales about new age religions and how they have evolved over the past few decades.

Cults, Conspiracies, and Secret Societies. Arthur Goldwag

Arthur Goldwag provides some good insight into a wide range of cults and conspiracies. Mr. Goldwag is a great storyteller, and this book is as entertaining as it is informative.

Aum Shinrikyo: Japan's Unholy Sect. Rei Kimura

This book covers elements of this infamous cult that the Western media have seldom covered. Besides the 1995 Sarin gas attack in Tokyo, this text goes into great detail about the crimes that led up to it. If you would like to

know more about this cult and the acts committed by it. This book is a good place to start.